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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 002421

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL KWBG IS GAZA DISENGAGEMENT GOI INTERNAL ISRAELI PALESTINIAN AFFAIRS

SUBJECT: POLLING LULL AND ANTI-WITHDRAWAL DEMONSTRATION

SPUR SPECULATION ON REFERENDUM RESULTS

REF: TEL AVIV 2382

Classified By: Political Counselor Norm Olsen for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) The brief vacuum of polling results, with private and public polls of Likud voters not expected until April 29 and 30 respectively, and the large-scale April 27 anti-disengagement demonstration in Gaza, have increased speculation by media pundits and politicians about whether PM Sharon's disengagement plan will squeak by in the May 2 referendum. While back-to-back holidays of Israeli Remembrance Day and Independence Day April 26-27 provided ample public speaking opportunities for Sharon to boost the plan, they also provided the sentimental and nationalistic backdrop and possible motivating force for the 70,000-person anti-disengagement demonstration that took place in the Gaza settlement of Gush Katif. While many of the demonstrators were families combining a withdrawal protest with their Independence Day holiday enjoyment, and most were reportedly not Likud voters, the optics of the event, replete with the appearances of Ministers Natan Sharansky and Effi Eitam, highlighted the level of settler support.

2. (C) Four days before the referendum, media speculation, last week's narrowing polls, a vocal and motivated anti-disengagement campaign, and the absence of key ministerial support in the disengagement campaign, have some withdrawal supporters concerned. D/PM Ehud Olmert told the Ambassador at an Independence Day event that he is worried about the referendum. He said that the problem was two-fold: Withdrawal opponents are more likely than supporters to actually get out and vote, and Sharon got a very late start in launching his campaign, opting to wait until the end of Passover to mobilize. Disengagement supporters reportedly will spend the coming days convincing Likud members to show up at the polls, and reports say Sharon himself will be calling numerous Likud Central Committee members to enlist their support.

3. (C) Former Labor PM Ehud Barak, who was at the same event as Olmert, reportedly told Olmert that while he hopes the referendum passes, he wonders why Sharon has bitten off "only one-tenth of the loaf." Barak noted that Sharon's plan does not go as far as Olmert's own withdrawal proposal. If the GOI must give up land to protect Israel, he asked, why not be honest with the citizenry and acknowledge that the country cannot hold on to all of the territory it now holds. (Note: Labor leader Shimon Peres reportedly offered Sharon the following advice: Take the disengagement plan to the Cabinet and the Knesset even if the plan is defeated in the referendum.)

4. (C) Comment: This week's much-awaited polls will either bring a sigh of relief or heightened concern to PM Sharon and his supporters. If the poll numbers continue to turn against him, Sharon will likely tie the referendum more firmly to a vote of confidence in his leadership, and more strongly stress both the need for his plan and the consequences of rejecting U.S. support. The opposition campaign will continue to deploy thousands of activists to rally Likud voters against the plan and continue to warn of what they say is the potential for polling fraud by disengagement supporters.

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